her, as for another commentator, Eileen Fisher, whom she quotes, *Company* cannot be adequately dramatized; experience of the text must be 'silent, readerly and solitary'.

The stance does not allow for the human qualities—the poignancy and humour of the 'memory' vignettes, for instance—which have attracted stage adapters to *Company* (I must declare an interest, being one of them). But this is all matter for argument, of a kind which takes us deep into the complexity and beauty of Beckett's *œuvre*. In stimulating thought on such matters Carla Locatelli's erudite analysis, despite its obscurities, provides a telling contribution to Beckett studies.

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Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism. By CHARLES ALTIERI. Pp. viii+530 (Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. £40.

Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects. By EDWARD LARRISSY. Pp. x+210. Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1990. Cloth, £35; paper, £10·95.

Charles Altieri's latest book is an ambitious undertaking and in many ways a courageous one. For he sets his face against the current fashions in deconstructive, historicist, or political criticism which, he suggests, subordinate art to the ideological interests they feel it ought to serve. His own Kantian position emphasizes instead the autonomy of poetry and its exemplary potential to influence the political and ethical self-determination of the perceiving subject whose stable existence post-structuralism disallows.

A summary cannot do justice to the intricacy of Professor Altieri's arguments and risks giving a misleadingly simplistic impression, in that the virtue of his book lies in the persuasive commitment with which his thesis is pursued in local details. Nevertheless some indication of the book's scope may be helpful. Its starting-point is the Romantic defence of the imagination against what Charles Taylor, writing on Hegel, has termed 'atomistic, utilitarian, instrumental conceptions of man and nature'. Altieri traces the legacy of two versions of Romanticism. In the first, the ethical importance of Wordsworth's poetry was restricted by his 'scenic' presentation of the self as defined in interaction with nature; this degenerated into the dramatization of the lyrical ego that beset much Victorian poetry. Against the theatricality of such expressive tendencies Altieri proposes an alternative in the work of Keats whose 'Greek insistence on encountering directly those energies of the mind that cannot be accommodated to the categories of moral reason, or even to the forms of coherence proposed by the self-reflexive memory' seems in retrospect to anticipate Modernist developments towards abstraction in poetry. As his subsequent examination of the work of Baudelaire and Flaubert indicates, it seemed that in avoiding the Scylla of self-dramatization the writer might succumb to the Charybdis of an ironic scepticism towards both Enlightenment 'lucidity' and Romantic 'lyricism', which undersells the imagination's potential to create an authentic alternative to bourgeois practicality. It fell to T. S. Eliot to finesse the self-consciousness of Romantic irony or expressivism through an impersonality generated by the formal intensities of the artefact itself.

Impersonality implies an abstraction in poetry cognate with the break from referentiality in Modernist painting, and Altieri attempts to trace parallels between the two media in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens. In suggesting painterly

models for this variety of poetic styles he writes particularly well on Cézanne and on Cubism; his command of recent developments in art history is exceptionally good. Those who seek *formal* parallels between poetry and painting will, however, be disappointed by the result. For Altieri maintains, I think convincingly, that, in drawing inspiration from painting, the poet 'must be wary of strict imitation. What matters is not the grammar, but the spirit it liberates.' The common ground of painterly and literary abstraction lies accordingly in the exemplary energies disposed in the artist's structuring activity; such constructive energy becomes a metaphor for the spiritual potential of the human mind, as it actualizes the virtual imaginative structures of the artefact, hereby revealing capacities of intellect and emotion that it comes delightedly to recognize as its own.

Altieri's exposition is extremely stimulating but his lively forging of connections sometimes results in difficulties. It isn't always clear whether he is merely citing a preceding writer as an analogy or is asserting an influence. Can one meaningfully say, for example, that the opening of Baudelaire's 'Une Charogne' 'offers a version of "Dover Beach"'? Or is Eliot in the opening of 'Prufrock' consciously 'combining Baudelairean mobility with Flaubertian distance'? In other words, Altieri sometimes projects his own framework of analysis on to the writers whom he discusses.

A thornier problem is provided by the very terminology Altieri adopts. His arguments are conducted with a strenuous rigour that is impressive but at times wilfully obscure in its phrasing. Altieri's humanist position deserves our sympathetic assent but the extremely abstract manner in which it is formulated risks forcing the sensuous concreteness of the work of art into a reductive conceptual strait-jacket. One respects his pursuit of precise aesthetic definition but if the artefact merely embodies 'models of agency and versions of emotional economy' or 'isolates forms of desire from the contingencies that determine its material shapes', would anyone be tempted by such ascetic pleasures? Cold pastoral indeed.

Less trivially, the repeated emphasis on the artistic imagination as an 'assertion of power' raises the spectre of a disquieting convergence between 'semantic force' and *Realpolitik*. The difficulty arises, I think, because Altieri wishes to reclaim for art something of its lost transitive function. It is a commonplace that English Romanticism saw a sublimation of political frustration into philosophical idealism. Altieri's aim of 'developing pragmatic implications' for his own 'aesthetic idealism' attempts to recapture for poetry a sphere of possible practical influence from which the later Romantics had regretfully abdicated. He is treading a narrow tightrope. Can one salvage the notion of artistic *virtù* as a manifestation of intellectual will or power from its Nietzschean or Poundian confusion with the political authoritarianism that such aesthetic élitism appeared to sanction?

In the final chapter Altieri bravely addresses such objections. The danger he sees is that the post-modernist demystification of the naïve political excesses of Modernism ends up by valuing art for its ability to accommodate itself to practical realities. Modernist art may often be dehumanized and ascetic but in its refusal to compromise it preserves an abstract vision of spiritual possibility that provides a necessary complement to the reductive materialism proffered by post-modernism. To defend the importance of a kind of secular transcendence is, he asserts, not necessarily to be guilty of complicity with bourgeois values.

This is a provocative book that intervenes trenchantly in the current debate about the institutionalization of 'theory'. If Modernism indeed remains an incomplete project, Professor Altieri has made an important contribution towards its recuperation.

Edward Larrissy's aim in his intelligent observations on a range of American and English poets—Pound, Eliot, Williams, Moore, Olson, Zukofsky, Oppen,

Tomlinson, Hughes, Plath, Heaney, Raine, Ashbery—is more modest. He demonstrates the continuing legacy of Romanticism in twentieth-century poetry, in particular of a poetic empiricism and of gender-based metaphors of submissiveness and control that stereotype the directing intelligence as male. He argues—following Marjorie Perloff—that recent developments mark a break from this Modernist tradition through an indeterminacy that acknowledges a debt to surrealism and allows scope for a polyphony hitherto often dismissed as 'feminine' irrationality. Although the blurb presents the book as 'Making some use of Lacanian theory', most of the exposition is fairly New Critical in approach and is written in a style that is both lucid and accessible to a non-specialist audience.

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Irish Literature: A Social History. Tradition, Identity and Difference. By NORMAN VANCE. Pp. xviii+316. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. £18·95.

W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction. By STAN SMITH. Pp. x+180. Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1990. Cloth, £25; paper, £7·99.

Norman Vance's starting-point is that the popular view of Irish literature remains too much a matter of Wilde, Shaw, Synge, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, that its mythology is too much rooted in Southern Ireland and in the nineteenth century. His book proposes an alternative view in which the Irish tradition is enlarged to include the North and at the same time extended backwards into the seventeenth century. He sees the Irish tradition as being formed and reformed by shifting alliances between the groups of which it is composed: Native Celtic, English-descended Ascendancy, and Scots-descended Ulster; Catholic, Church of Ireland, and Presbyterian; moderate nationalist, non-nationalist, and extreme nationalist. The separate allegiances of each group have overlapped at different times, causing the groups in turn to reconfigure.

Vance's survey focuses on five periods, in each case combining a general survey with a separate study of two complementary figures. Thus, his survey of the Scots and Cromwellian settlements is rounded out by short essays on Archbishop Ussher and the Earl of Roscommon, both of whom 'found security amid Irish uncertainties in a comprehensive European vision'. It continues with a survey of the eighteenth century which leapfrogs Swift, Berkeley, Burke, and Goldsmith to concentrate on William Drennan and Thomas Moore as two versions of nationalism (Protestant radical and Catholic compromise) which have been obscured by the better-known Yeatsian model focused on Georgian Dublin. The two Irish Victorians are William Carleton and Thomas D'Arcy Magee, 'comparative failures', 'hampered by an atavistic sense of tradition'; and the Revival is examined in terms of the careers of St John Ervine and Joyce, 'united, if in nothing else, in their complex disrespect for [its] ambiguous achievements'. Vance's book ends with a chapter on present-day Irish writing at large from the perspective of Ulster writing in particular. The Planter, John Hewitt, and the Gael, Seamus Heaney, are taken to stand for everybody writing between Independence and the present.

It will be evident that the argument represents special pleading no less blatant than what it contends against. Vance is unlikely to persuade readers to forsake Swift for Ussher, or O'Casey for Ervine, or even Thomas Kinsella for Hewitt. County Down is the literary heartland of Ireland only in the sense that Cape Breton is the thought-centre of Canada. More seriously, there is no more reason to begin Irish literary history with the Plantation of Ulster than with the Plantation of Munster; and if one is to contest the supremacy of the Ascendancy Revival, why not set the beginnings (as Thomas McGreevy did) with the invasion of Strongbow or (as Brian Coffey has) with